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An Escape from Language into Language: The Internal Exile of Louis Wolfson

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AN ESCAPE FROM LANGUAGE INTO LANGUAGE:

THE INTERNAL EXILE OF LOUIS WOLFSON

by

ANTOINE RIDEAU

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Comparative Literature in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Comparative Literature
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ABSTRACT

An Escape From Language Into Language:

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Antoine Rideau

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This paper aims to show how the life and work of American francophone author Louis Wolfson - who suffered from schizophrenia and underwent a self-imposed exile from his own mother tongue - might serve to illuminate European émigré writers' relationships to multilingualism.

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Over the last few decades, researchers in the field of linguistics – in part due to recent developments in neuroscience – have had to completely reconsider the way they understand people who speak, write and think in more than one language. In doing so, they have opened up a new, fascinating – and extremely complex – area of study: the brain of the bilingual or multilingual person (specifically, how it differs from that of those who, up until recently, were considered standard: monolinguals).

Linguists such as Vivian Cook (2003) have begun to redefine the way in which we think about the relationships between languages in the very minds that harbour them. Rather than have us conceive of languages as separate systems – where the first one retains pride of place or programs our brain in a particular way – they want us to realise that the simple action of acquiring knowledge of another tongue changes the very way in which language works in our brains, making us more insightful, aware and successful users of all our languages. Furthermore, the effects of bilingualism (or multilingualism) on brain processes not obviously related to language – cognitive flexibility, for instance – are currently being investigated as well, opening up many intriguing avenues of inquiry.

One of the main problems hindering this type of linguistic research, however, is the fact that it is very difficult to conduct quantitative studies on multilinguals, as they are an extremely diverse group: the properties of the languages they speak, the age at which they learned to speak them, the contexts in which they use them, all these factors (and more) mean that no two multilinguals are alike. As a result, linguists interested in studying the effects of multilingualism often turn to more qualitative methods of investigation – case studies are a common choice – or focus on specific sub-groups of multilinguals. Limiting the scope of inquiry makes it possible to formulate hypotheses and identify patterns (with the drawback that they are not generalisable to a larger population). The work of Elizabeth Beaujour in studying multilingual writers in general and Russian émigré writers in particular is one example of how this might fruitfully be achieved

(1989). Through the analysis of the work and linguistic history of such authors as Vladimir Nabokov, Elsa Triolet and Joseph Brodsky, Beaujour discerns several recurring characteristics of émigré writers, among them a tendency towards wordplay, formal experimentation and compulsive yet reluctant self-translation; a strong emotional investment in their mother tongue (especially when emigration was forced upon them) and a predilection for describing the relationship between their languages using images of conflict or intercourse.

Though Beaujour extends the scope of her research to encompass multilingual writers from other backgrounds (like Samuel Beckett, Nancy Huston, Raymond Federman or Ariel Dorfman), one defining trait that all these writers share (with the possible exception of Beckett) is that their linguistic journey, and hence the nature of their multilingual output, is characterised to a very large extent by a blend – its particularities depending on the author's circumstances – of trauma and exile. It therefore remains to be determined which traits Beaujour assigns to émigré writers are the result of their multilingualism and which the result of their experience of forced abandonment of their country and culture.

Using to the life and work of an American writer, Louis Wolfson, as a case study of our own and asking ourselves in what measure he might be considered an émigré writer might here prove to be a productive way of shedding light on this question, given his own traumatic experiences and path to multilingualism. We shall thus start by analysing Wolfson's unique relationship to his mother tongue and to the languages he subsequently acquired, without a doubt as the result of trauma linked to his mental illness. We will then see how his linguistic particularities and his psychological profile are linked, according to both Wolfson himself and the many psychoanalysts who discussed his case. Finally, acknowledging the individuality of his voice as a multilingual author will allow us to see precisely how comparing him to the émigré writers that interest Beaujour might be useful in determining which of their shared proclivities are due to their ability to use more than one language.

Louis Wolfson's linguistic history bears some resemblance to that of the Chilean-American (and bilingual) writer Ariel Dorfman: the sons of Eastern-European Jews (Dorfman's parents were Russian and Ukrainian; Wolfson's were Russian and Belarusian) who immigrated to the Americas in the first half of the 20th century, they both had the unusual reaction of completely refusing to use the language in which they were raised. In both cases, these refusals followed experiences of parental betrayal in medical contexts: Dorfman was kept isolated from his parents whilst he was being treated for pneumonia at the age of three (Dorfman, 1998) and emerged cured but refusing to speak Spanish, whereas Wolfson, throughout his teens, underwent several bouts of electroshock and insulin-shock therapy as well as repeated interments in psychiatric institutions as treatment for his schizophrenia, diagnosed at an early age. The fact that this brutal treatment was administered against his will and at the behest of his mother (Heller-Roazen, 2005, p.180) made it all the more traumatic and, consequently, he developed in his mid-twenties a very strong aversion for the English language, which he referred to – pointedly and with disgust – as his 'mother tongue'.

Beyond the general pattern of their story, the degree of the rejection of their mother tongue is not comparable: Dorfman still understood Spanish and in fact returned to it ten years later after moving to Chile (Dorfman, 1998). It might be said that he had undergone a similar linguistic shift to that which many children of immigrants make – albeit in a rather more drastic fashion than is common. Wolfson, on the other hand, born and raised in New York, reacted against not just his mother tongue but the language of his environment and of his entire life. What's more, he didn't simply refuse to speak it, he went to great lengths, both linguistic and practical, to avoid even being exposed to it. He developed a complex system of linguistic subterfuge, using languages he subsequently acquired (French and German to begin with, then Russian and Hebrew), to re-interpret almost instantly any English that he might hear. In 1970, at

the age of 39, he wrote a book (*Le Schizo et les langues*), in French, published in Paris, in which he detailed this process of destructive translation - all the while referring to himself in the third person - explaining how he...

...systematically sought not to listen to his mother tongue, which was exclusively used by all around him [...]. Nevertheless, since it was hardly possible not to listen to his mother tongue at all, he tried to develop ways to convert words almost instantly (especially those he found most troublesome) into foreign words each time, after they had penetrated his consciousness despite his efforts not to perceive them. So that he could somehow imagine that he was not being spoken to in that damned tongue, his mother tongue, English. Indeed, he experienced reactions that were at times acute and that made it even painful for him to hear the language without being able to convert the terms into words that were foreign to him, or without being able to destroy constructively, in his mind, the terms that he just heard in that bloody language, English! (Wolfson, quoted in Heller-Roazen, 2005, p.180)

That this rejection of English was brought on in large part by trauma is evident in the pain Wolfson describes as feeling when his stratagem fails him, yet what is even more noteworthy is the staggering complexity of the linguistic tricks he employs to 'foreignise' the English words that reach him. Gilles Deleuze, who wrote the preface to *Le schizo et les langues* and was fascinated by Wolfson, sums up the mental gymnastics that "l'étudiant en langue schizophrénique" – as Wolfson called himself – undertook in his efforts to shield himself from the hated language:

...ce que fait l'étudiant, c'est traduire suivant certaines règles. Son procédé est le suivant : un mot de la langue maternelle étant donné, trouver un mot étranger de sens similaire, mais ayant des sons ou phonèmes communs (de préférence en français, allemand, russe ou hébreu, les quatre langues principales utilisées par l'auteur). Par exemple, *Where ?* sera traduit en *Wo ? Hier ?* où? ici?, ou mieux encore en *Woher*. L'arbre *Tree* pourra donner *Tere*, qui devient phonétiquement *Dere* et aboutit au russe *Derevo*. Une phrase maternelle

quelconque sera donc analysée dans ses éléments et mouvements phonétiques pour être convertie en une phrase d'une ou plusieurs langues étrangères à la fois, qui lui ressemble en son et en sens. L'opération doit se faire le plus vite possible, compte tenu de l'urgence de la situation, mais aussi exige beaucoup de temps, compte tenu des résistances propres à chaque mot, des inexactitudes de sens qui surgissent à chaque étape de la conversion [...]. Tel est le procédé général : la phrase *Don't trip over the wire*, Ne trébuche pas sur le fil, devient *Tu'nicht trebucher uber eth he Zwirn*. La phrase de départ est anglaise, mais celle d'arrivée est un simulacre de phrase empruntant à diverses langues, allemand, français, hébreu : « tour de babil ». (1993, p.19)

This is a startling and extreme example – as described by Deleuze – of the mental agility and linguistic flexibility that linguists have shown are a defining feature of multilinguals and which Beaujour identifies in multilingual writers, even though it is driven by psychosis rather than by the more customary motivator in literary circles: a desire to play, experiment and impress. A good example of this might be, say, the *Killer Crónicas* of Chávez-Silverman, whose innovative and unapologetic use of Spanglish in her stream-of-consciousness memoirs is meant as a performance, a display of linguistic brio, to be read out loud (Chávez-Silverman “is developing a reputation as a lively public reader of *Killer Crónicas*” – Hernandez, 2005):

I looked at myself up and down en esos vegetable mirrors, bien sheepish, y me di cuenta that I was wearing red, fuzzy slippers! In Safeway! [...] Pero there I was, in slippers. You know, esos hideos pantuflas como las housewives in newspaper cartoons wear?

All the same, even a talented and desperate linguist like Wolfson cannot constantly keep up this tour-de-force of understanding without understanding; there is only so much he can transform at a time. His coping mechanism is then to try and blot out, cancel or ignore what he can't 'translate': he pre-emptively memorises phrases in a foreign language when he knows he's about to be addressed in English; he stops his ears with his fingers or tries to drown out the sound by groaning loudly, banging on the table or gnashing his teeth; he tries to protect himself

by constantly reading foreign books or listening to foreign language radio on a home-made contraption composed of a tape-player and a stethoscope. As a matter of fact, he sardonically



Figure 1: Wolfson and his Walkman
(Source: Wolfson, 1984)

claims to be the inventor of the Walkman, considering that he started using his device in 1976, a few years before the commercial version came to American shores (Deleuze, pp.23-5). In these ways, he would manage to limit the input that he would then have to ‘convert’ to a few syllables or words.

In his essay “Schizophonetics”, Heller-Roazen highlights the fact that Wolfson is able to use on-the-fly translation as a refuge from English in this fashion only because he breaks down the words to the level of phonemes, which allows him to then proceed to a phonetic *glissement* to other, related but foreign, phonemes: “Decomposing the word he heard into its phonological properties and the signs of their written notation, the New York psychotic could alter one of the atoms, so to speak, of its sound shape and carry the entire term out of the terrible language of its original utterance and into another (or, to be exact, into several others)” (2008, p.185). He gives

the example of the relatively simple conversion of *bed* into *Bett* by the substitution of an unmarked consonant for another. In other words, the principal process which allowed Wolfson to trick himself into believing he wasn't hearing English was one of phonetic transcription, one that enabled him "to write and rewrite the painful terms that penetrated his consciousness": "only by transcribing his mother tongue could he dissolve it into another" (ibid.). This tendency is underscored both in his unwillingness to read any printed English (for instance, he describes how he would merely glance at the label of the canned food he consumed and then hastily 'translate' it – easy in the case of something like *vegetable oil*, not so in others) and in his propensity, in his French language book *Le schizo et les langues*, to follow any quoted English with its graphic phonetic form (e.g. *vèdjtebel oïl*) in order to "dismember it in writing" (ibid.). His editor, J.-B. Pontalis, in fact revealed that Wolfson at one stage had formulated the project of transforming his own text completely by using a reformed, phonological writing of French, one that would be 'transparently' oral in nature (Uriburu, 2013): *le jeune öme sqizofrène* is an example quoted by Deleuze (1993). This again highlights a sensitivity to spoken language and a tendency towards formal innovation and the use of imaginary languages that is typical of multilingual writers, Nabokov first among them. Not only does he weave the invented language 'Zemblan' into the loose (and formally very innovative) fabric of his novel *Pale Fire*, but one has only to think, for instance, of the marvellously off-kilter English that the hapless émigré academic protagonist of *Pnin* ("whom fate has left dangling in the English language" [Besemeres, 2002]) is made to speak to understand how keenly Nabokov was attuned to the phonetic interplay of his many languages and that "what is lost to the emigrant evicted from his mother tongues is also, from another angle, what is lost on his native English-speaking peers when they think they understand him" [ibid.]. Timofey Pnin's English is a vivid blend of literally translated Russian, mispronounced English vowels and stilted phrasebook idioms, glorious in its misplaced confidence and Russian cadences:

"You are," suggested the voice warily, "Mrs. Fire?"

“No,” said Joan, and hung up. ...

...the telephone rang again.

“It is evident,” said the same voice, comfortably resuming the conversation, “that I employed by mistake the name of the informer. I am connected with Mrs. Clement?” (Nabokov, 1989, pp.31-32)

Nabokov’s ear for the phonetic slippage that Pnin keeps tripping over (“Mrs. Fire” is, in actual fact, Mrs. Thayer) and the way he sometimes playfully renders it (he notes Pnin’s “*dzeefecooltsee*” with depalatising his English consonants) [Besemeres, 2002, p. 395] are strongly reminiscent not just of Wolfson’s own experiments with transcribed French, but of a long tradition of attempts to reform French orthography, of which one of the more resonant examples for our study might be Raymond Queneau’s ‘néo-français’: a phonetic rendition of French which he playfully hoped would replace standard spelling (as in the opening line of his *Zazie dans le metro*: “Doukipudonktan?”).

Though this “traduction éperdue”, as Rajàa Stitou refers to it (2002, p.166), only occurs in spoken interactions, which might at first be thought to limit the scope of the comparison to the work of other multilingual writers and would-be language reformers, let us not forget that a great deal of these deconstructing interpretations are recorded and analysed at significant length in *Le schizo et les langues* – meaning that even though the book is primarily written in French, Wolfson’s translations do form a part of the literary fabric of his work. So far, Wolfson has only published two books (the second one in 1984), both in France, neither of which has received much attention outside of France, in large part due to the difficulty of translating them (particularly into English, for obvious reasons). Consequently, he remains little known in his

own country: an American author who writes in French, speaks three more languages and ‘forgot’ one.

Yet the reception of his work in France was not focused entirely (or even chiefly) on the literary merit of his writing, as might be surmised from the fact that Deleuze – for whom schizophrenia was a subject of great importance – wrote, in addition to the introduction to *Le schizo et les langues*, an essay on Wolfson in *Critique et Clinique* (entitled “Louis Wolfson, ou le procédé”). Deleuze was especially interested in the way the obsessive compulsive behaviours and the paranoiac tendencies associated with schizophrenia manifested in specifically linguistic ways in the case of Wolfson: “La psychose est inséparable d’un procédé linguistique variable. Le procédé est le processus même de la psychose” (1993, p.20). He underlines the striking parallels between Wolfson’s translation method and that developed by another schizophrenic artist, the French poet Raymond Roussel:

[Roussel] opérait à l’intérieur de la langue maternelle, le français; aussi convertissait-il une phrase originale en une autre, de sons et de phonèmes semblables, mais de sens tout à fait différent (« les lettres du blanc sur les bandes du vieux billard » et « les lettres du blanc sur les bandes du vieux pillard »). Une première direction donnait le procédé amplifié, où des mots associés à la première série se prenaient en un autre sens associable à la seconde (queue de billard et robe de traîne du pillard). Une seconde direction menait au procédé évolué, où la phrase originale se trouvait elle-même prise dans des composés autonomes (« j’ai du bon tabac... » = « jade tube onde aubade... »). [ibid.]

In both cases, according to Deleuze, the writers extract a sort of foreign language from their mother tongue, all the while preserving the phonemes of the original. How pertinent is the fact that both men are schizophrenic to the discussion of their transformational ‘procédés’? Schizophrenia is a complex disorder whose causes are still incompletely understood, yet it is

clear that there are a range of symptoms that are commonly encountered in those afflicted: anxiety and paranoia, hypochondriasis, obsessive compulsive behaviour, bulimia and anorexia, as well as a number of language-related disorders, such as a lack of regard for language rules, the repetition of speech (known as echolalia), disorganised speech and – in more extreme cases – schizophasia, or ‘word salad’ (language confused to the point where it is not much more than a string of nonsensical words with no apparent relation to each other).

Wolfson certainly suffered from most, if not all, of these: his experiences in mental institutions left him with a deep distrust of doctors and severe hypochondriasis. This in turn drastically affected his relationship with food: he was petrified of ingesting larvae, worms or insect eggs (“trichine, ténia, lombric, oxyure, ankylostome, douve, anguillule” [Wolfson, 1970]), and only ate canned food as a result; he alternated between periods of starving himself and food ‘orgies’ in which he would rampage through the kitchen, ripping open tins whose labels he would not read and crushing empty ones underfoot. He developed a fixation on horse-racing and spent all his free time at the tracks and developing betting strategies. His book sheds a sad light on his racist, paranoid delusions against black people and Jews (“Je devrais certes foutre le camp de là avant sept heures et demie (du soir)! Autrement je risquerais trop d’être tué dans l’obscurité par les juifs en rentrant” [ibid.]) and he accused his French editor of publishing his book during President Pompidou’s 1970 visit to the United States in the hopes that a deranged Wolfson would assassinate him and generate publicity for the book [Drillon, 2012]. More pertinently, as regards his literary work, his psychotic rejection of English and his habit of compulsive translation do reveal a particularly troubled relationship to language, one that is at the same time uniquely generative. What’s more, the cross-linguistic and rule-bending idiom he uses to protect himself from English would seem like word salad to anyone who did not know the four languages he juggles with and might fairly be described as a form of echolalia, a distorted repetition of speech.

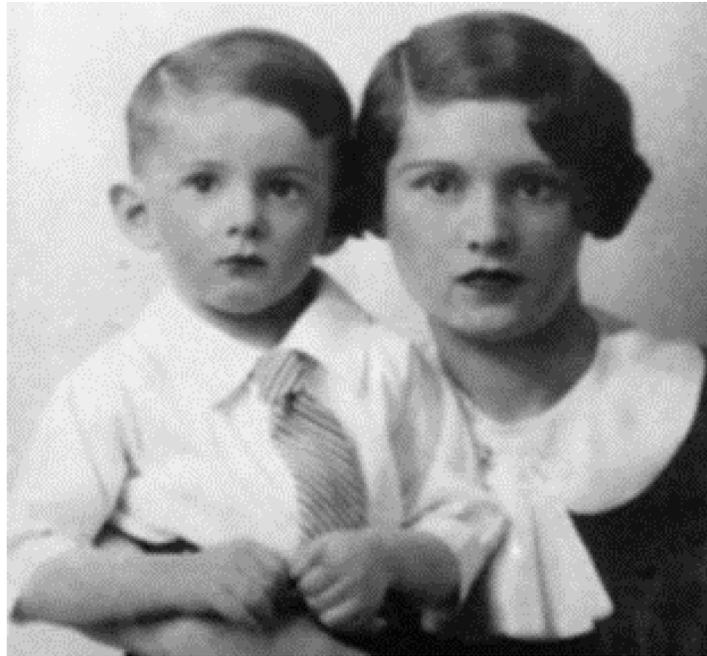


Figure 2: Wolfson with his mother, 1934
(Source: Wolfson, 1984)

Whereas it seems very likely that their schizophrenia contributed to both Roussel and Wolfson developing their linguistically transgressive styles, it would be rash to conclude that there is a ‘schizophrenic’ way of writing. Deleuze himself notes the difference between the two: with Roussel, “c’est la référence des mots qui se trouve mise en question, et le sens ne demeure pas le même: aussi l’autre langue est-elle seulement homonyme et reste française, bien qu’elle agisse à la manière d’une langue étrangère”. Wolfson, on the other hand, operates more on the plane of translation and he uses a mix of several languages to simultaneously conserve the sounds and meaning of the original English and destroy the ‘mother tongue’ (he very consciously uses that particular idiom) to which they belong. “C’est peut-être le but secret de la linguistique, d’après une intuition de Wolfson: tuer la langue maternelle” [1993, p.21].

Another reason, besides his mental illness, that “jusqu’il y a peu, le cas Wolfson était exclusivement un terrain de réflexion théorique sur la psychopathologie” [Uriburu, 2013] and

interested psychoanalysts from Lacan to Melanie Klein [Drillon, 2012] is the way in which the symptoms of his schizophrenia combined with, or were even compounded by, his fraught relationship with his mother. Neither Wolfson's father nor, subsequently, his stepfather were very present and Rose Minarsky's role in the internment and brutal treatment of her son led to a significant breakdown of trust between child and parent. Upon the publication of *Le schizo et les langues*, analysts were quick to point out the "acte matricide" [ibid.] of Wolfson's complete rejection of his mother tongue, which – as he quite clearly states in the book – meant specifically for him his mother's actual words. Despite her son's painful and extreme reaction to English, Rose Minarsky kept addressing him in this language for years (only relenting much later and speaking to him in the Yiddish of her childhood, which he understood and caused him no distress). Wolfson experienced this as persecution, as if his mother was "decided to strike her son simultaneously with the tongue of her mouth and of the English people every time she spoke to him", particularly when, determined to break through the linguistic and physical barriers he erected between himself and the "terrible idiom", she would burst into his room and repeatedly shout at him words he refused to hear, "almost incessantly and at the top of her lungs" [Wolfson, quoted in Heller-Roazen, 2008]. Referring to himself in the third person, he says that "malgré toutes les déclarations d'amour solennel pour lui [...], le schizophrène pense que la conduite récente de sa mère envers lui, et surtout sa conduite verbale, fournit une forte preuve d'une indifférence fondamentale, sinon une forte antipathie, pour lui" [1970].

In light of this, it becomes obvious that Louis Wolfson's deployment of four languages to rid English of its sting amounted to an attempt at emancipation from the mother with whom he still lived and on whom he was still legally dependent (until her death from ovarian cancer in 1974). In the words of Robert Schamacher:

Comment cet enfant pouvait-il contrecarrer l'envahissement produit par les différentes manifestations de sa mère qui « en tant que son unique possession » exerçait sur son fils une

contrainte dont il ne pouvait se défaire, le réduisant ainsi à la « débilité », incapable de penser, soumis qu'il était à l'impératif de la langue de cette mère, qu'elle parlait d'une voix forte et très aiguë qui rendait cette langue douloureuse [...]. La voix de cette mère non soumise à la coupure symbolique rend compte de la caractéristique de l'Autre préalable de la psychose. Elle ne transmet pas la castration qui permettrait au sujet Louis Wolfson d'exister en dehors d'elle [...]. De ce fait, il doit en permanence mettre en place des défenses dans le réel, non seulement mettre les doigts dans les oreilles pour ne pas entendre les sons de cette voix mais utiliser aussi comme subterfuge, l'apprentissage de langues étrangères pour se défendre et ne pas être envahi. [2005]

Yet Wolfson himself is not unaware of the perverse nature of his relationship with this mother and the segments on the subject are some of the most fascinating and revealing in *Le psycho et les langues*. In an attempt to make sense of his condition, Wolfson develops an elaborate system of equivalences between two parallel systems: Life and Knowledge. His mother's words are equated with food and with life; "méchante matière malade" [Wolfson, 1970]: the maternal voice is toxic in the same way the food he eats (laced with larvae and eggs) is poisonous. His mother's cancer (of the ovaries: "j'ai également commencé là, du moins dans un certain sens (ovule)" [Wolfson, 1984]) will acquire strong symbolic meaning for him. Of his ailing mother he says:

... je la trouvais sur le divan... sa chemise de nuit retroussée jusqu'au-dessus de son sexe où la chimiothérapie sembla avoir beaucoup ravagé la pilosité autour de l'orifice par où je fus sorti, sans l'avoir demandé, dans ce monde infernal de mensonge, de lutte, d'échec, de souffrance, de mort mon portail à un dilemme démoniaque auquel ma seule délivrance sera ma mort. [ibid.]

The association mother-English / food-poison / life-cancer is balanced in his eyes by an equivalent category of Knowledge (that he doesn't *need* but has acquired or can acquire): in the same way he learns foreign languages to exorcise the power of his mother's tongue, he intellectualises and purifies his mania over food by memorising and reciting over and over the

caloric content or the chemical composition of the food he is ingesting (for instance “les longues chaînes d’atomes de carbone non saturées” of vegetable oils). He ‘translates’ the food items in a similar process to the one he uses to break down his mother’s words, in order to neutralise them. Following this logic, he pays close attention to news of the Cold War arms race (on foreign radio stations) because he believes that the only justification for the existence of our cancerous, suffering humanity would be its destruction by atomic bomb, the ultimate, divine embodiment of knowledge: “Dieu est la bombe, c’est-à-dire évidemment l’ensemble de bombes nucléaires nécessaire pour stériliser par radioactivité notre planète elle-même extrêmement cancéreuse..., Elohim hon petsita, littéralement Dieu il bombe” [Wolfson, 1970]. He labelled Ronald Reagan a sadist for taking steps to limit nuclear proliferation [Drillon, 2012].

Looked at in psychoanalytically, these attempts to tame a disturbing reality through codification, his anti-Romantic belief in the cleanliness of scientific knowledge and the antiseptic power of a Fatherly A-bomb might very easily be interpreted as extreme attempts to compensate for the absence of a father figure that should have emancipated him from his mother’s exclusive embrace. In Lacanian terms, Wolfson – lacking a father – is incapable of internalising either the *nom du père* (the identification with the law – represented by the Father) or the *non du père* (the Oedipal prohibition of incest, which introduces a necessary symbolic distance between mother and son), which prevents him from making the transition from a primal state of unregulated, obsessive desires towards the mother to the symbolic order of meaning (in other words, to a healthy engagement with the world outside the family). For Lacanian psychoanalysts, this makes Wolfson a textbook psychotic. However neatly his mental illness, his manias and his familial circumstances fall into this frame of interpretation, we must remember that one of the main motors of Wolfson’s literary ambitions was a desire to be seen as something more than a schizophrenic.

The re-publication of his second book, *Ma mère, musicienne, est morte de maladie maligne mardi à minuit au milieu du mois de mai mille977 au mouvoir Mémorial à Manhattan*, in 2009 (originally published in 1984 but fallen out of circulation), has contributed to a shift in the perception of his work: moving beyond a psychoanalytical focus on his mental issues and their linguistic manifestations, many have realised that “ses écrits dépassent la psychopathologie psychanalytique et ses textes intéressent d’autres disciplines, notamment le théâtre” [Uriburu, 2013]. Contemporary scholars, such as Jean-François Chassay, are distancing themselves from the diagnostic perspective of the past forty years and describing Wolfson’s work as:

un cas limite, mais pas son excès même, représentatif d’un phénomène qui traverse toute l’histoire moderne de la littérature américaine. Comment parvenir ou comment échapper à la langue anglaise ? Tel est le problème auquel se consacrent de nombreux écrivains, problème qui a des racines historiques évidentes. [1992]

The book, composed of fragments from his mother’s diary and his own reflexions on her disease and “alliterative death” is a far more poetic work than the first, which was an uncategorisable effort, somewhere between an autobiography, a treatise on etymology and a scientific manual. In particular, as might be deduced from the title, *Ma mère, musicienne...* suggests a far more complex relationship between Wolfson and his mother than most of the commentators up until then had picked up on, working as they almost all were from his self-reported observations, rather than from an actual case study. As Daniel Heller-Roazen points out, the bond between mother and son is as paradoxical as Wolfson’s quixotic project to forget English: “forcing himself never to forget to forget his mother tongue, he obliged himself always to remember to remember it” [2008, p.186]. Wolfson still refused to hear English, yet they were able to communicate by using Yiddish. He visited his dying mother in hospital, sat by her bed, but refused to remove his headphones and read French treatises on cancer the whole time. Freed by her death (in the very real sense that he became legally independent), he moved to Montréal, only to publish a book about her agony seven years later. Wolfson’s behaviour towards his

mother in her final months – if we make abstraction of the trappings of his psychosis – revealed what was essentially a very common (normal, even) tendency to oscillate between love for the woman he spent his life with and repulsion stemming from a natural desire for independence. The fact that, in Wolfson’s case, this oscillation was one of rare intensity and amplitude can be largely attributed to his illness and the circumstances it led to.

However, it is these paradoxes and his skill in presenting this relationship through the lens of his condition that reveal his worth as an author: “Et tout cela conscient, et logique. Et tout cela fou. Et tout cela d’une douleur ironique hallucinante, froide, sans aucun sentiment, aucune plainte” [Drillon, 2013]. Many critics mention the uniqueness of his voice as an author: Deleuze (1993) calls it “un impersonnel schizophrénique” (*Le schizo et les langues* is written entirely in the third person), which, combined with a trademark predilection for the conditional mode, makes for a style characterised by “la puissance du simulacre ou de l’ironie [qui fait] du livre de Wolfson un livre extraordinaire, illuminé de la joie spéciale et du soleil propre aux simulations, où l’on sent germer cette résistance très particulière au fond de la maladie”. María Eugenia Uriburu also remarks on the originality of his work when she says :

Dire que Wolfson est un écrivain n’est pas chose aisée. Entre fou littéraire et auteur d’un écrit brut ou d’une autobiographie géniale, Wolfson utilise un langage qui est la traduction de la langue maternelle, sa lutte constante contre la langue haïe. [...] Nous considérons que sa bataille personnelle a été de vouloir être autre qu’un schizophrène étiqueté. Bien sûr il le manifeste par son activité d’écriture. Pourrons-nous supposer que cette idée n’existe pas chez un « vrai » écrivain ? [2013]

This desire to be judged as a writer and not as a mental patient, this resistance to both his illness and to the suffocating voice of his mother, is what Max Kohn picks up when he calls Wolfson “le fils du loup [...]. Louis de son prénom, est une bête féroce. Il ne veut absolument pas être *Le schizophrène* dont il parle. Il veut être écrivain. Écrire, c’est de la folie. Rien ne tient, ni la

langue, ni le corps. Tout est instable, et peut chavirer dans l'abîme. Oui, une langue, c'est de la folie, et la folie, c'est une langue" [Kohn, 2005]. Yet we have seen already, by comparing him with Roussel, that the distinct timbre of his literary voice is not solely due to his schizophrenia. Whether or not it is therefore a consequence of his multilingualism is hard to say with certainty, but he shares many traits with other multilingual writers whose style has been profoundly affected by their knowledge of more than one.

As Elizabeth Beaujour (1989) notes, multilingual writers – in all likelihood due to their increased cognitive flexibility – often display a love of wordplay, such as alliteration (a rather fine example of which being the title of *Ma mère, musicienne...*), code-switching, the use of experimental forms and imaginary languages; all of these might fairly be said to be essential not just to his 'procédé' of on-the-spot translation, with its unholy mess of languages, but to his French writing also, filled as it is with repetitions (suggestive of echolalia), formal innovations, constant references to other languages and wild etymological detours:

In *Le Schizo et les langues* (1970)–

- Vous disiez que vous êtes ici « pour affaires ». Vous êtes une prostituée ? (Ces quatre derniers mots seraient articulés lentement, clairement et en français, cela en quelque sorte comme une expérience car si elle pourrait comprendre l'espagnol quelque peu (*êtes* y étant souvent épilé et prononcé *estáis*) et le mot de « prostituée » étant assez international...)

Elle ferait signe de la tête affirmatif avec enthousiasme et le sourire aux lèvres.

- Tu fais ça depuis longtemps ?

[L'auteur emploiera la deuxième personne singulière quoique en anglais on dise toujours « vous », *you*, hormis certains groupements très restreints tels les Quakers (kouéi^k(r)z ; = trembleurs), le tutoiement étant donc en général désuet.]

- Depuis pas mal de temps, dirait-elle avec son sourire léger. Mais je suis très effacée. Je n'ai jamais été attrapée par la police. La brigade des mœurs ignore jusqu'à mon

existence. Du reste, j'ai également une situation à plein temps pour que je puisse justifier mes dépenses. Je fais manoeuvrer une machine à la maison Technicolor (tèknèkòl^{e(r)}, *e* ouvert tonique et les *e* caduques non arrondis, « *o* ouvert » *non* arrondi et facultativement une *r* fugitive et plutôt apicale). (p.78)

In *Ma mère, musicienne, est morte...* (1984)-

Si Rose était à mes côtés ce jour-là à l'hôpital Booth Memorial, je ne ferais pas de même pour elle quand elle serait dans cette même salle d'urgence le jour de la Fête des mères l'année d'après et qu'elle serait, au contraire, passablement proche de son agonie. (p.118)

Many multilingual authors, particularly those for whom there is one clear 'native' tongue, go through phases in which they will limit their written output to a given language (like the decision Nabokov took to only write fiction in English for ten years). Whilst Wolfson has only so far written two books and both are in French, his editor Pontalis reports that at one stage he suddenly requested that their correspondence no longer be conducted in French, but in German (for which he gave no reason) [Tama, 2005]. Still according to Beaujour, it is common among multilingual writers to display strong (though not necessarily unchanging) emotional investment in their different languages; Wolfson's relationship to English could scarcely be more highly charged, but he also, later in life, showed surprising fondness for Yiddish, which both his mother and his stepfather eventually used to communicate with him. The use of violent or sexual imagery to describe the interaction of the languages one possesses is another recurring trope among this sub-category of writers and – though Wolfson in fact uses very little metaphoric language – some of the expressions he uses to describe his reaction to English are comparable in intensity: he likens his mother's attempts to overpower his defences by shrieking English at him as "injections" directly into his ear drums [Stitou, 2002], an image given even more weight by its echoing of the treatment he unwillingly received at the hands of doctors and nurses.

Nonetheless, it is on the quality of his French writing that his worth as a multilingual author will be decided; writers with access to more than one tongue are often said to write in a way that ‘rejuvenates’ the very language they are using, through the influence of the different traditions and syntaxes they are channelling. Wolfson’s French seems to be no exception:

...un français que l’on dirait d’un charme parfois suranné, avec des contre-temps qui ne sont pas des fautes syntaxiques ou un manque de maîtrise de sa part mais comme la marque indélébile de cette personnalité hors-norme qui gondole tout un texte. Wolfson enquille les répétitions de manière pathologiquement évidente, se lance, drapé derrière sa maladie mentale, dans un jeu de massacre qui aurait valu un bouquet de procès au moindre pékin qui l’aurait tenté à sa place. [Bruyant, 2012]

Drillon describes it as “un français légèrement distordu, pas normal, qui ne ressemble à rien, où l’on échoue à démêler l’influence américaine, l’invention, le talent, la folie: *Depuis qu’il avait plus de dix ans qu’elle*, par exemple” [2013].

We set out to find any points of convergence between the case of the schizophrenic writer Louis Wolfson and the study of émigré, multilingual authors conducted by Elizabeth Beaujour in *Alien Tongues*. Aside from a take on translation (as an act of creative destruction, of exorcism, of survival) that was definitely unique to him, we found many things in Wolfson - in terms of attitude towards language, novelty of style and formal experimentation – that reminded us of other, more illustrious literary polyglots. The fact that it remains very difficult to say with any degree of certainty how much of his originality is due to his multilingualism and how much to his schizophrenia might be said to serve only to underscore even further this resemblance, as Beaujour reports that many of the writers she studied refer (not entirely in jest) to their multilingual condition as being one of personalities split along language lines.

However the more profound resonance may yet be found in the reasons they have – not just for writing – but for writing in a language foreign to them. For some, like Beckett, it was a means to find a creative freedom their native language did not afford them (haunted as it was, for Beckett, by the ghosts of the literary giants that came before him); for others, like the émigrés Nabokov, Dorfman, Federman, it was a means to overcome and digest the trauma of losing their mother tongue and the childhood it was bound up in. For Wolfson, it was both: writing was/is a healing chamber of soothing repetition in which “the echomaniacal, or more exactly echolalical, brain of the young schizophrenic recapitulates the wounds inflicted on him by the sounds of the tongue that is like no other” [Heller-Roazen, 2008] and the key to an independence and an ambition that was impossible in the language of his mother. Wolfson escaped from language into language, in order to acquire some degree of control over his words, his condition, his life. [His second exile - to the Caribbean this time - was even more felicitous, although far less literary: it came after he won the lottery in Canada and became a millionaire at the age of 72; sometimes a mania can be a useful thing]. Ultimately, the ones he may share the most affinity with are most likely the ones who, like him, undertook their exile voluntarily: “the words say it well: your native, or ‘mother’ tongue, the one you acquired in earliest childhood, enfolds and envelops you so that *you* belong to *it*, whereas with the ‘adopted’ tongue, it’s the other way around – you’re the one who needs to mother it, master it, and make *it* belong to *you*” [Nancy Huston, 1999].

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